# Kurse of the Kudzu

*(Extracted from an article By Lucile Bayon Hume printed in River Cities, September 1992.)*

"*Why in heaven's name*," one might ask, "*would anyone want a land-hungry vine badly enough to cultivate it when we can't stop the stuff from growing?*"

But the U.S. wanted kudzu once, introducing the plant from Japan at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. After C.E. Pleas of Chipley, Florida, planted a field of kudzu proving it would thrive in our climate, the country welcomed it with open arms as a savior of our soil. Because kudzu weaves a sturdy web of root systems which act as a net to hold dirt in place, and, at the same time, enriches the soil with a nitrogen-fixing bacteria, the luxuriant foliage seemed to be the answer to both farmers' and landowners' prayers to preserve a land not only deeply cut by gullies and ravines, but from the rapacious appetite of *Ole Man River*' for bluffs and banks which periodically slide into his waters.

## Land-Hungry Vine


The government actually planted kudzu in a soil conservation effort and committed the classic crime of hubris (*i.e.,* overbearing pride or presumption, arrogance), which was the traditional downfall of mankind in ancient Greek tragedy. In the classical theater, when man took things into his own hands and thumbed his nose at the gods, the dieties of Olympus got together and came up with suitable punishment to put the offender in his place. In this case, man messed with Mother Nature, and she got the South back with a vengeance -- kudzu is the vine that ate the South, compliments of Mother Nature.

It may grow sixty feet in length in one season. Its roots may reach a depth of eight feet and have a circumference of three inches. Give it an inch, and it will take a county. Imagine one long, insignificant plant in a pasture. Kudzu, a member of the legume family, resembles soybeans or cow peas and when it blooms has reddish purple flowers that are the image of those of the common garden bean. But when no one is looking, kudzu slips its long tentacles into the soil, silently consuming more and more acreage. The roots of the plant are jointed, and, at each joint, branches of two to four feet reach upwards and become separate, independent plants as the stems between the rooted joints die. One plant produces armies of new plants which in turn produce their own armies which march across the South, devouring telephone poles, swallowing trees, burying junkyards and smothering vacant buildings. As kudzu creeps, it leaves behind it a trail of vine-covered figures that look as if a topiary artist has run wild.

Telephone and electrical companies, however, are not amused. Kudzu has no respect for cables and transformers and no concern for the power outages it causes. When the kudzu shinnies up telephone and power line poles, service problems are imminent. If not actually weighing down and stretching the wires, kudzu will literally smother a transformer. The moisture retained in the leaves after a rain, or even a heavy dew, will affect the efficiency of a transformer and cause power surges, so even if service is not completely interrupted, electrical equipment may be damaged.

Kudzu has made the rounds in agricultural and horticultural books, going from desirable listings following its introduction, to now being listed under pests and weeds. Once established, it is next to impossible to get rid of without killing every other green and growing thing in the vicinity. Chopping is ineffective, since the roots are still productive. Digging is effective, but with roots eight feet deep, a lot of digging is required. Since kudzu is essentially a woody plant when its stems and runners mature, chemicals which kill it also kill trees as well. And of course, burning kudzu will destroy the surrounding vegetation.

Kudzu was traditionally used for treatment of gastro-intestinal maladies, circulation problems and headaches, and currently is used in China to treat cardiovascular diseases. In Japan, tea made from kudzu has long been used for alleviation of complaints ranging from muscle aches to allergic reactions and congestive disorders, including asthma and sinusitis.

In the U.S., we are able to acknowledge the fact that kudzu is good for the soil and recognize the fact that horses and cows adore it as a high protein feed. It is also of value as a mulch, but these attributes do not outweigh the aggravation it causes.